

From Series
Schools That Serve The Community

A HIGH SCHOOL AND ITS IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY
A CHALLENGE AND AN OPPORTUNITY

BY

LEONARD COVELLO
Principal, Benjamin Franklin High School

Reprinted from
THE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL SOCIOLOGY
Vol. IX, No. 6, February 1936

Ex Libris

SEYMOUR DURST

t' Fort nieuw Amsterdam op de Manhatans



FORT NEW AMSTERDAM



(NEW YORK), 1651.

When you leave, please leave this book
Because it has been said
"Ever'thing comes t' him who waits
Except a loaned book."

604 2198 604 25

AVERY ARCHITECTURAL AND FINE ARTS LIBRARY

GIFT OF SEYMOUR B. DURST OLD YORK LIBRARY

A HIGH SCHOOL AND ITS IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY—A CHALLENGE AND AN OPPORTUNITY

LEONARD COVELLO

Principal, Benjamin Franklin High School, New York
Vice-President, East Harlem Council of Social Agencies, New York

In New York City, the public-school system occupies not only an important strategic position but also a unique position in the life of the community. It is the only social agency that has direct contact with practically every family within the community and the education law makes this contact with the family compulsory from the early childhood to the late adolescence of every boy and girl. This is important when one realizes that the public-school system functions in a city which has a population of close to seven million people, of whom one million two hundred thousand go to school.

In a city of the size of New York, with a population made up mainly of comparatively recent migrations from every nook and corner of the world, a study of the composition and characteristics of the population is a vital necessity.

The total population of New York City, according to the United States Census for 1930, was 6,930,446. An analysis of the population figures of this Census brings out certain significant and educationally important facts, as follows:

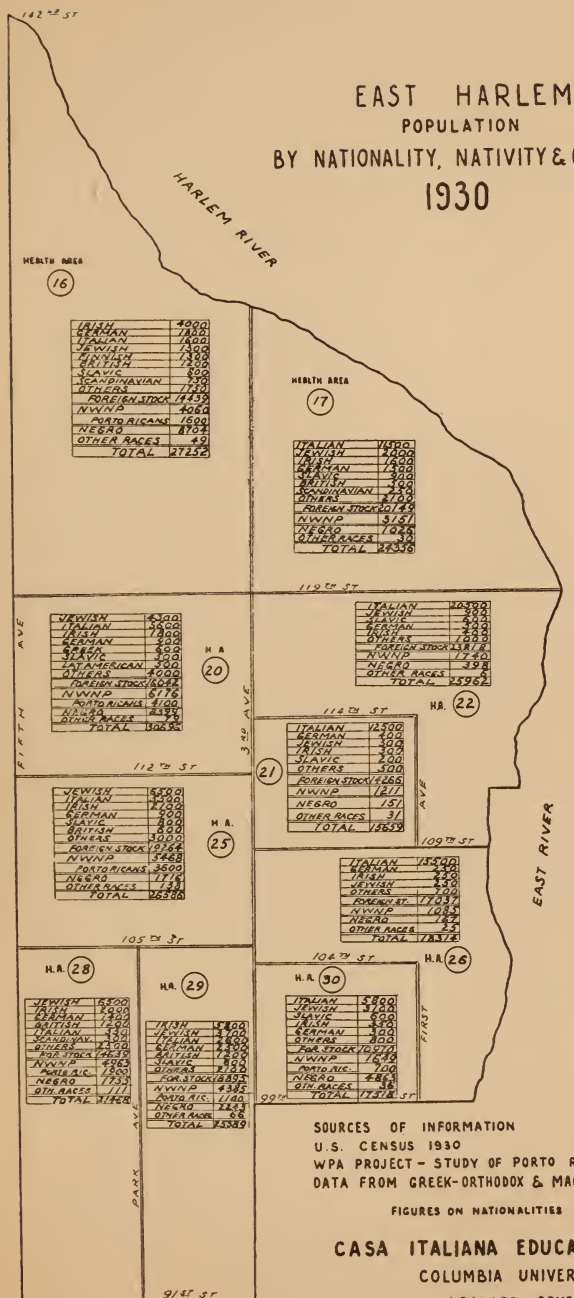
<i>Native stock</i>	{ 1,505,200 or 21.7 per cent of the population is <i>native white</i> of <i>native parents</i>
<i>Foreign stock</i>	{ 2,788,625 or 40.2 per cent is <i>native white</i> of <i>foreign-born parents</i> 2,293,400 or 33.1 per cent is <i>foreign born</i> 343,221 or 5.0 per cent is Negroes and others

The fact that 73 per cent of the population of New York City is of foreign stock is, of course, very significant.

In general the composition and characteristics of the popula-

tion of New York as shown by the United States Census of 1930 are true for the East Harlem community in Manhattan in which the main building of the Benjamin Franklin High School is located. The high school draws its student body largely from this community whose total population is 233,400, according to the United States Census of 1930. Of this total, 20,888 or 9.0 per cent are native white of native parents. Of the foreign stock, 13,000 or 5.6 per cent are Porto Rican; 86,174 or 35.7 per cent are native white of foreign parents; 83,345 or 36.9 per cent are foreign born; 29,422 or 12.7 per cent are Negroes; and 571 or .1 per cent other groups. As these figures show, in the section where the Community Advisory Council of the school is concentrating its efforts, 78.2 per cent of the residents is of foreign stock. It is estimated that about a third of the population is of Italian origin. There is also a rapidly increasing population of Spanish-speaking peoples, mainly Porto Rican, while there is, and has been, a correspondingly rapidly diminishing population of people of Jewish, Irish, and German stock.

These facts are educationally important. The school, in order to be effective, must keep constantly in mind the fact that it is dealing with a heterogeneous population, new to American soil, transplanted here in haste, and only now beginning to take root. This new immigration is still struggling with a bilingual problem, is still facing all types of difficulties in trying to adapt itself to the varying, quickly shifting, and confusing standards of social behavior. It is still living under emotional stress because it has been unable to adjust itself adequately to the speed and complexity of our industrial and commercial life. It is still incapable of adjusting itself to the tempo of American life. This condition is further aggravated by the fact that these communities are often isolated from the more wholesome forces in our American life. These things create problems difficult to solve and present both an obligation and an opportunity to the school.



JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

The problem of juvenile delinquency, for example, is one that baffles all the forces of organized society. The police, the home, the church, and the school seem helpless in meeting the situation. The causes of delinquency are many and varied but one fact seems constantly evident, viz.: that the highest rate of delinquency is characteristic of immigrant communities. This fact obtrudes into every consideration of this problem. It is true, however, that the delinquent is usually the American-born child of foreign-born parents, not the immigrant himself. Delinquency, then, is fundamentally a *second generation* problem. This intensifies the responsibility of the school, the one organization most definitely charged with the duty of molding youth into a better type of citizen. In juvenile delinquency and crime, the economic problem is an extremely important factor but it is not, by far, *the* most important factor. The most important cause is to be found in the weakening of social controls in these communities—controls that were operative in the homelands and in the communities from which the foreign born came. That fact has definitely increased juvenile delinquency and it has drawn into the criminal class more and more of the youth of the country.

In these immigrant communities, composed of foreign-born parents and American-born children, the most critical period in the life of the family is that in which the children reach adolescence and on through the adolescent period. This is the high-school age. It is the age when the so-called American idea of "living one's own life," which the immigrant-born children have absorbed from their American environment, begins to clash with the European idea of family solidarity, of obedience, of respect for elders, and of subservience to family needs and requirements.

The real educational problem lies in the emotional conflicts that are particularly tormenting to the boy or girl whose parents

still have both feet planted firmly and deeply in centuries of European tradition and custom. With these established traditions and customs, the younger generation is often in conflict. There is often a feeling of scorn and shame in the children of the foreign born because of the pressure of adverse opinion from without their own racial group. This often produces an anti-social attitude that is dangerous to the boy and dangerous for the community. This antisocial attitude is largely the fertile breeding ground for the crime and delinquency that present such a disturbing problem for school and society.

THE SCHOOL AND FORTY MILLION NEW AMERICANS

The situation thus briefly outlined is not peculiar to any one community alone. Conditions of this nature prevail not only in many communities in New York City but in practically all industrial centers where the new immigrant has sought work and tried to found a home. Out of a total population of about 125,000,000, approximately 40,000,000—or one third of the people of the United States—are of foreign stock. For these people in their foreign communities a more wholesome community life must be evolved. It is difficult to do this, particularly at this late stage. The problem of assimilation and of cultural harmony, the development of a wholesome national consciousness in the midst of great cultural diversity, the clash of racial and nationality interests are really basic problems—and they must be the chief concern of the school because to the school is entrusted the education of the future citizens.

Unfortunately, the school, in the past, has failed to realize fully the importance of these problems; neither has it perceived definitely the extent of its influence in arriving at a happy solution of the difficulties peculiar to the immigrant's unfixed and unrecognized American status.

Let us for a moment ask: What role has the public school

played in immigrant or foreign communities in which it is located? What role is it playing today? Has the school really felt the life of the community pulsating beyond its four walls? Has it made an attempt to realize the problems and the difficulties with which the immigrant neighborhood is faced? Has it answered the community call for help and its need and longing for guidance? To what extent has the school penetrated into the community, analyzing, encouraging, and developing its latent educational forces, and helping to counteract the forces of disorganization that apparently even the highly organized society of today seems unable to curb even in the better ordered communities?

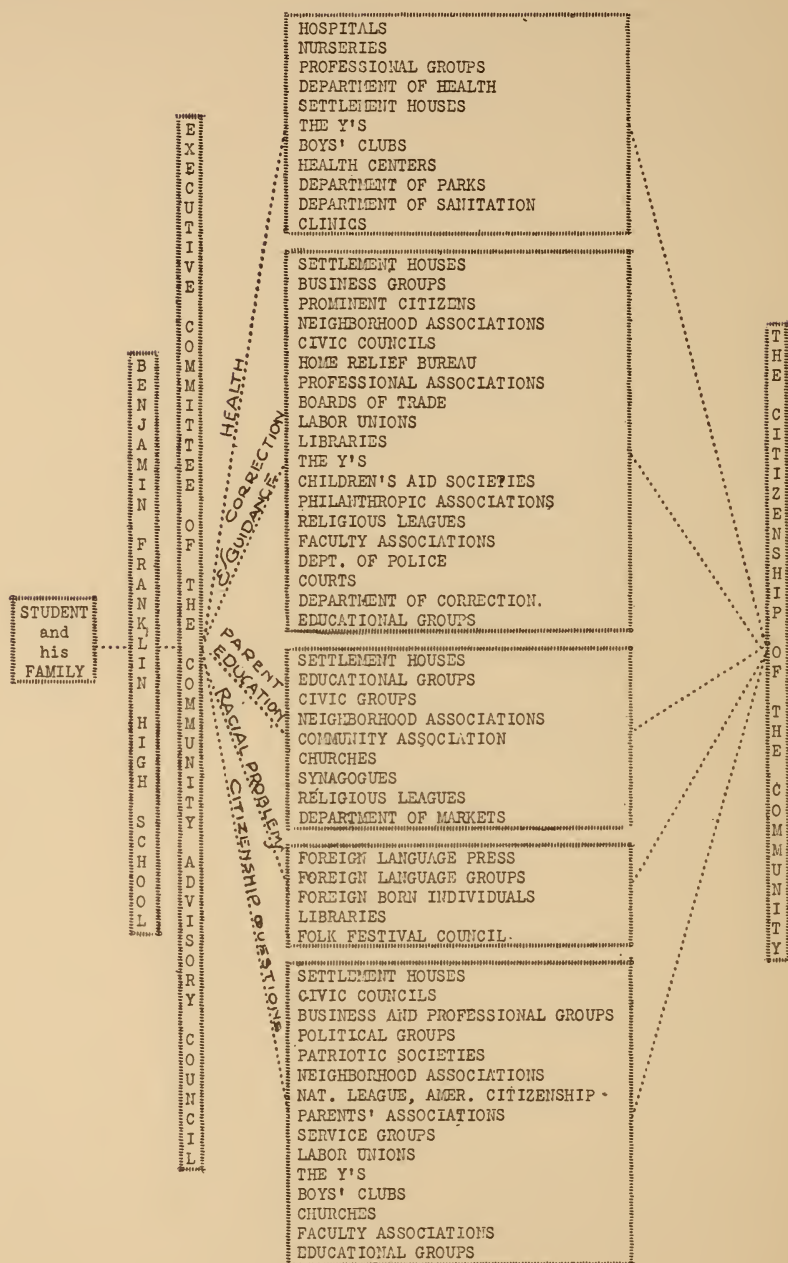
The answer to all these questions, unfortunately, is very discouraging. The school, in the past, has met few, if any, of these problems. However, there seems to be at present an awakening sense of duty and of opportunity that may produce a changed outlook and a stronger influence for progress in the future. The school is reaching out for the contacts and the program that will provide a basis for effective work. To function successfully, it must know not only the social and educational background of its boys and girls, but it must also go one step further; it must strive to understand the individual child in his social relationships outside of school. More important still, it must play an active and aggressive part in the affairs of the community. The school must assume the role demanded by its very nature; it must be the leader and the coördinating agency in all educational enterprises affecting the life of the community and, to a certain extent, the pivot upon which much even of the social and civic life of the neighborhood shall turn. There can be no denial of the fact that there are, outside the school, vital, powerful, and compelling forces that are constantly educating the boys and girls of the community in spite of, or contrary to, the school ideal. The surging life of the community as a whole, its motion-

picture houses, its dance halls, its streets, its gangs, its churches, its community houses, its community codes of behavior and morals—these will either promote or destroy the work of the school.

The Benjamin Franklin High School soon realized this fact and set about organizing a Community Advisory Council. This Council proposes to bring to the aid of the school all the constructive forces within the East Harlem district so as to combat the many disruptive forces of the community. The main building of the high school itself is in the heart of an immigrant community that seems to have suffered from an almost malevolent concentration of those factors in modern industrial life that warp human development. Unsanitary dwellings, congested housing, lack of play space, unsightly streets, low economic returns for the wage earner, exploitation of the worker and often of his whole family, lack of proper opportunities in all the varying phases of life—all these things have contributed to the deterioration of the East Harlem neighborhood into what is known as a "tough" district among those who are unfamiliar with the potential human values basic in the people and in the life of the community. The fact that there is a widespread lack of understanding of these inherent values in the immigrant centers throughout the Nation creates problems that should be of interest to progressive educators.

A COMMUNITY-CENTER PROGRAM

The Benjamin Franklin High School is merely feeling its way toward what may be a proper solution of these problems. The school naturally sought, from the beginning, to identify itself closely with the social and educational agencies in the community. Members of the faculty were asked to serve on committees of the Yorkville Civic Council and the East Harlem Council of Social Agencies. The principal of the school was elected vice-president of the latter organization, while the main



ORGANIZATION OF THE COMMUNITY ADVISORY COUNCIL of the BENJAMIN FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL

Leonard Covello -- Chairman

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Harold Fields -- Chairman

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL		
PROMINENT CITIZENS OF THE COMMUNITY		
EDUCATIONAL Members of Board of Education The Superintendent of Schools Assoc. & Asst. Superintendents Members of Local School Boards Principals of Local Public Schools Principals of Parochial Schools	CIVIC GROUPS Patriotic Societies Neighborhood Associations Nat. League, Amer. Citizenship Civic Councils Home Relief Bureaus Parents' Associations	SOCIAL AGENCIES Settlement Houses Libraries Community Associations The Y's Children's Aid Society Philanthropic Assn. Health Centers Scouts' Clubs Nurseries
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL Parents' Association Alumni Association Faculty Club	FOREIGN LANGUAGE SOCIETIES AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE PRESS Societies Press Folk Festival Council	RELIGIOUS GROUPS Churches Synagogues Religious Leagues Affiliated Church Organizations
	MUNICIPAL DEPARTMENTS Parks Health Hospitals Clinics Sanitation Markets Police Courts Correction	BUSINESS & PROFESSIONAL GROUPS Professional Associations Boards of Trade Service Groups - Lions, Rotary, etc. Labor Unions

building of the school was used for the yearly meeting of the East Harlem Council of Social Agencies for 1935. At this meeting the program of the school and the scope and work of the school's Community Advisory Council were discussed fully.

Concurrently with the opening of the day high school in September 1934, the school, in coöperation with the East Harlem Council of Social Agencies and the Civil Works Administration, set up an afternoon community playground from 3.30 until 6.00, for the children of the neighborhood. An evening community center for adults, open from 7.30 until 10.00, was established also in an effort to place all the facilities of the school at the service of its neighbors from early morning until late at night. The Community Advisory Council, as may be seen from the charts reproduced here, has called upon every community organization that comes in contact in any way whatsoever with the people of the neighborhood.

The school, and the coöperating agencies in the neighborhood, are centering attention and effort upon certain fundamental aspects of the educational problems of the community because of a conviction that to correct the causes of maladjustment is patently the task of any school that wishes to aid in transforming these communities of foreign-born people into an integral part of the larger American community to which they should, for the good of all concerned, belong fully and happily. To accomplish this, it is necessary first to allay the distrust and the antagonism that have arisen out of misunderstanding and indifference. Disruptive forces must be replaced with a spirit of friendliness and intelligent coöperation in the building of wholesome social and civic relationships. There must be a spirit of tolerance and of mutual give and take between the immigrant and his children and the native born and his children. The immigrant and his children must be made to feel that they "belong" to America. They must be made to realize that America

does not regard them as inferiors and that all that is not American is not to be scorned. They must be encouraged to feel that "a knowledge of and a pride in" their foreign cultural heritage is natural and just—something desirable for themselves, for the America of today, and the America of tomorrow.

These children of the foreign born must be given the pride and the sense of equality that are absolutely essential to their well-being, because personal dignity cannot be founded on shame or fear. For such shame and fear, the school must substitute ambition and self-respect that will lead these boys and girls to make a real contribution to America through lives that are well ordered, happy, and constructive. Furthermore, these children of the immigrant must be made to feel that the school is a symbol of the finer things of life. Warmth, friendliness, interest in the individual that knows no limitations of race, creed, politics, temporary adversity, or of social misfortune—these are the important things, particularly in dealing with youth. Too often they are omitted because of the complexities of modern living; too often the inability to find time for friendly individual contacts and for a real understanding of the needs of youth defeats the most zealous and well-meaning plans for educational and social betterment.

The Benjamin Franklin High School is dedicated to the task of building a finer citizenship and a better community life for all. Whatever may be the measure of its success, no matter how many may be the obstacles and the discouragements, the school will continue to try to meet its larger responsibility and its larger opportunity. In doing this every agency and every influence will be marshaled into the service of the community. In order that citizenship may be made vital to the boys of the district every resource and every facility will be merged in a comprehensive program for the future.

THE COMMUNITY ADVISORY COUNCIL

Already five major committees, which will work in the five major fields for improving the citizenship of the boys and of our community, have been formed. They are the Health Committee, the Citizenship Committee, the Parent Education Committee, the Correction and Guidance Committee, and the Racial Committee. Last year a limited survey of the social and educational agencies in the district was made. This survey will be continued more intensively this year and will be regularly included in the yearly school program in an effort to assemble all available data for use in the proposed plan for coördinated community education, with the school as the center of activity. The school must know its community intimately in order to work out an intelligent and effective program.

To ensure full neighborhood participation, generous use will be made of languages other than English. A great many of the older people in the community do not use English but speak instead some foreign language. This makes it necessary to interpret American life to them not only in the English language but in their own languages as well. Plans are being made also to reach the numerous racial and national societies through languages with which they are familiar. The students of the language department of the Benjamin Franklin High School will give plays from time to time in foreign languages, and in English also for these foreign-language-speaking groups. There will be musical programs, and questions of citizenship, child guidance, health, and other personal, social, and community problems will be discussed. We feel, moreover, that the contact of the boys of the school with the older groups will tend to create a sense of responsibility in these boys and will aid in developing the latent leadership that certainly exists among them. That this is true has been proved in the past by results obtained by some of us who have been doing, successfully, work of this

kind for a great many years. It is still needed and we shall continue it intensively and with larger means than has been possible in the past.

Educating youth is not the sole task in a foreign community like that of East Harlem; parent education is an equally vital need. There are special aspects to this program also, if the real problems are to be intelligently met. The Parents' Association into which all members of the community are welcomed will be developed more fully along racial lines because it is felt that the foreign-born parent must know the school and what it offers. Use of languages other than English—as well as English—makes it easier for the non-English speaking parent to realize the difficulties that face his children and aids, therefore, in establishing more wholesome and harmonious relations in the home. A great deal of our time during each day at the school is taken up by interviews with parents who do not speak English and who are helpless, therefore, in coping with situations that arise between them and their children. The school acts as a medium of harmony whenever and wherever it is possible to serve in this way. Our Student Aid Committee, through its home visiting, is working along these same lines.

EDUCATION FOR CITIZENSHIP

The work of the Citizenship Committee of the Benjamin Franklin High School offers proof of how civics can be taught through a practical program rather than merely through textbooks.

In an endeavor to interest the boys of our school in the citizenship of their parents, we have instituted a naturalization drive for the benefit of their parents and relatives and neighbors. We have organized a corps of speakers from among our own students who will present to the boys of the school the reasons why they should be concerned about the citizenship of their parents. The movement in this way becomes an expression of interest on

the part of the boys rather than one that is imposed upon the students by the teachers.

To aid in creating further interest, letters in English and in several foreign languages are sent by the teachers to advise the parents of this citizenship drive and to urge them to become citizens for their own sake and for the sake of their children. A form asking for their citizenship or alien status accompanies these letters. When this form has been returned a second letter to parents seeking naturalization is sent out informing them where and when they can receive training in citizenship and complimenting them upon their interest in becoming citizens of the United States.

At a designated time a group of naturalization secretaries who have been gathered from associated agencies in this field will report at the school to assist personally these alien parents. As a matter of interest, the students are being urged to accompany their parents on these evenings. Application forms are filled out free of charge, citizenship questions are answered, and immigration matters are discussed.

The result of all this has been a greatly increased interest in citizenship among the boys and a closer coöperation between the school and the patriotic, civic, and welfare organizations of the community. Likewise, the boys have become more genuinely interested in the affairs of their parents. At the same time, the parents have been made to feel that the school exists to serve them as well as their children. This has brought about a better understanding generally and has made possible a program of related activities beneficial to all. Moreover, the elementary schools and the junior high schools have been drawn into closer coöperation with the high school. The principals of these other schools are also notifying parents of the opportunity to prepare for citizenship, thus creating a desire for participation on the part of the entire community.

SOCIAL-WELFARE ACTIVITIES

The social agencies in the community have already been indexed by institution and type of service and the school will make this information available through the boys for their families. Whenever necessary the information will be translated into the language which the parents understand and, if need be, connections with these agencies will be established by the Student Aid Committee of the school which has been already actively in touch with many of these agencies.

To combat the prevalence of truancy and delinquency which has been rather marked in this district, we plan, in coöperation with interested citizens of the community, to establish a "Big Brother" movement in the district. Teachers, parents, and others will assist in this phase of the work, which will be done not only by the adults of the community but by some of the older boys of the school as well. Experience in this type of service leads me to believe that these young men will render excellent service.

A joint program in the study of housing conditions has been carried out with the Lenox Hill Neighborhood Association, which has prepared a very interesting exhibit of charts, graphs, and models which the students of the Benjamin Franklin High School visited during school hours. The housing exhibit was then transported to the school library and for over a week was made available for study and discussion to all the students in the school. The English, social science, and art departments took up in their classes the question of housing. Discussions of housing, compositions on better houses and model houses and even model villages were included in this program which has led to an intelligent and real appreciation of housing and its effect on the community.

Another venture centers about individual aid for students. Many of the boys desire to secure information about opportuni-

ties in different lines of work or in careers they wish to follow. To meet their needs, we arranged a series of assembly meetings dealing with the opportunities open to boys today in various professional and nonprofessional fields. The discussion leaders were men and women of the community who had succeeded in their particular lines of work. In this way we will be able to assist our students as a body; and, in specific cases, refer them to properly qualified individuals who will study their cases and recommend their entrance into the field of activity for which they seem best qualified.

The advisability of establishing a series of adult forums using English and foreign languages is under consideration. Through these we hope to reach the parents of the boys. Our ultimate hope lies in the fact that if these forums prove successful, we can convey to the parents and to other adults in this neighborhood an understanding of what we are trying to accomplish and we can help them in arriving at a more sympathetic approach of the problem of raising their American-born child of foreign heritage.

As for myself, I am firmly of the conviction that America, which began as an experiment in democratic institutions, can only continue and grow as a democracy if democracy will concern itself particularly with these forty million people of foreign stock in the country—the forty million new Americans of whom a goodly number are concentrated in isolated immigrant communities, “for democracy cannot rise any higher than the level of the mass of its citizens.”

Surely by working thus upon a plan for better, finer community life, as well as for better education, the school justifies itself more fully. Out of this intelligent widening of its activities and influence may come the fulfillment of the hopes and dreams that have spurred some of us to ceaseless thought and effort in behalf of the youth of today.



